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Reviews

The Hunterian Redisplayed

The redisplay of the Hunterian Museum, although not yet fully complete, allows an opportunity to take stock anew of this magnificent and varied collection. Assuredly the grandest and most diverse to be housed in one location within the Scottish university system, this has rightly now received the official *imprimatur* of a ‘collection of national significance’ within Scotland. Of the three principal exhibition spaces, two are devoted to the collection of William Hunter, anatomist, doctor and obstetrician, and – as importantly – collector *extraordinaire*. The third (including its balcony) comprises an eclectic, but not haphazard, juxtaposition of material, which, to this reviewer, successfully marries – for the most part – a diverse range of aspects of the University of Glasgow’s collections. This is, architecturally, the most impressive gallery in the museum, and a pleasing blend of Gothic revival and Victorian engineering. At the time of writing, only the Scottish Roman sculpture (itself acquired since the 18th century) awaits redisplay, as an important component of the wider, World-Heritage-List-inspired, reconsideration of the Antonine Wall and the material culture associated with it. It meantime sits in a corner, densely serried and, despite the undoubted merits of many of the pieces, looking slightly forlorn, as if abandoned in a waiting room.

Contemporary museum displays tend to have veered away from the cluttered appearance once a hallmark of many of their predecessors. In this case, fortunately, this trend has not been taken too far. To the writer, this is important, for it allows something to survive of the spirit in which many of the original acquisitions were made, whether by Victorian or other collectors – within Britain, on the fringes of Empire or indeed beyond – who subsequently became benefactors; or by direct accession to the museum itself. It also makes plain the fact that the Hunterian collection is a survivor, in a world – indeed a city – where other significant collections, notably the Andersonian (1831–88), have been dispersed and largely lost (although not the Andersonian’s Indian elephant, redisplayed here). The richness of the collection on display is also important, in that this is a university museum, with key messages to convey about the achievements of some of its former students, and about those – professors and doctors – who have practised and refined their skills and talents whilst working within the institution. In a real sense then, the collection manages physically to embody quite a lot – patently not all – of the best of what a university was and is about, in a way that a library’s worth of shelved books, still less a corridor’s array of portraits of (mostly) rather severe-looking men in later middle age (or beyond), cannot readily achieve. And, rightly, there is an element of celebration in this collection, perhaps primarily – but by no means exclusively – in the achievements of Hunter, and of William Thomson, Lord Kelvin.

William Hunter's life and career, and the nature and range of his magnificent collection, form the centrepiece of the Museum's displays. These – presented in a logical order if the museum is entered via the lift – chart, indirectly, the rise of the East Kilbride boy, seventh of a family of ten, through his student days at Glasgow, to further studies in Edinburgh, London and Paris. Physician in Extraordinary to George III's Queen Charlotte by the early 1760s, he brought all but one of her fifteen children into the world. Other achievements of that period of his life included the opening of his Public Anatomical Museum in Great Windmill Street, London in 1766. By the end of that decade he was, *inter alia*, a Fellow of the Royal Society, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (of London), and Professor of Anatomy for the Royal Academy of Arts. During this time and until his death in 1783, he amassed an extraordinarily rich and wide-ranging collection, in part directly linked to his medical expertise, but much of it ranging far beyond. It is this material, transferred (along with his paintings) to Glasgow University in 1807, which provides much of what is presently on display.

The medical specimens in their rows of glass jars and phials at first sight is a shock, in a world which has now become unsure of the rectitude of displaying human remains, even in skeletal condition. But they are an appropriate reminder that the 18th century world of science, whilst in some ways very modern, had not the squeamishness of our present age. These were other times, with other customs and other vocabularies. And so Hunter's collection of deformed animals were 'monstrosities'. The human remains he owned included the bones of a celebrated London dwarf, 'Leather Jack' *aka* Owen Farrel. His medical achievements are otherwise celebrated, particularly through his work on the 'gravid uterus', notably as illustrated by J. N. Rymsdyk. Beyond these elements directly related to his career, are many items drawn across the range of his exuberant collection: a selection of his books and manuscripts, geological samples, antiquities, coins (of course; he apparently spent over £20,000 acquiring them), shells, butterflies, paintings (most of these last are in the University's Art Gallery, with selections from his Coin Cabinet). A message particularly usefully conveyed is that the relative value of objects, considered in purely monetary terms, was very different ten generations or so ago. Overall, this is a graphic presentation of a remarkable 18th century success; the Age of Reason encapsulated in a man's possessions.

The achievements of Lord Kelvin, presented in the main gallery upstairs on the balcony, are demonstrated very differently. The display is rather more high-tech and, in the spirit of our times, interactive. This display was completed about three years ago and, whilst most of the interactive components were functioning when I was there, and provided metaphorically and sometimes actually illuminating insights to a selection of his break-throughs, not all of them were. Some of the panels of information and images highlighting different aspects of his career were a little cumbersome to use, but overall I thought this part of the exhibition worked well, and made plain the huge range of the interplay between pure and applied science that characterised Thomson's diverse contributions to Victorian science. In developing this presentation of William Thomson's astonishing career, however, I thought the contributions of his collaborators and assistants – notably Glasgow instrument makers such as James White – were kept in focus; and any risk of hagiography was off-set by such references to the Victorian industrial



Fig 1 View of the main gallery with the archaeology sharing a gallery with natural history and fossils

context and the international scientific milieu within which Lord Kelvin was working.

The remainder of the upper gallery here, not yet fully displayed when I visited in late 2008, is designed to show Glasgow University's contributions to the medical sciences, primarily since the 19th century. I thought this provided a useful counterpoint to the Thomson display, for here were set out, necessarily more summarily, the achievements of a range of medical scientists and surgeons. William Hunter figures again, but now alongside Lord Lister, and a host of other contributions—to operating theatre practice, cancer studies, ultrasound, X-rays, pathology and forensic science, nutrition and public health among other fields.

It is, however, in the main gallery that examples of just about everything else in the diverse collections (or so it seems!) are presented. In part, these displays are thematic, on topics as varied as hominid evolution, Scotland's geology, dinosaurs, meteorites, first contacts with indigenous populations in the age of exploration and their repercussions, bird's nests, spongeware, and aspects of archaeology. In part, they highlight the contributions of individual collectors who have given their materials to the Hunterian, from the pioneering palaeobotanist Emily Dix to the Scottish archaeological objects gathered by A. Henderson Bishop and his father before him and made over to the University in 1951. There are numbers of resonances with other aspects of the collection, manifested for instance by an example from the collection of skulls made by T. H. Bryce, amateur archaeologist primarily on Arran, as well as the University's Lecturer in, then Regius Professor of, Anatomy (and a curator at the Hunterian) for quarter of a century to 1935; and



Fig 2 View of the portion of the archaeology display focusing on the Near Eastern collection

the Ptolemaic gold coins from Egypt, collected by ‘Abyssinian Bruce’ in 1770 on his way south through that country in search of the source of the Blue Nile, coins which subsequently entered William Hunter’s Cabinet.

Inevitably, there is an unevenness about such eclectic displays, but it would be hard not to come across items and topics of interest. I did, however, find the treatment of the archaeological material, and perhaps especially the local archaeological finds, disappointing. Some of this material is undoubtedly splendid—the carved stone balls included in the ‘Henderson Bishop’ case for example. But, discounting the Roman material for the reasons outlined above, the key case is a display, primarily of arrow- and axe-heads, of edge-tools from the Palaeolithic to the later Bronze Age. Whilst aesthetically pleasing, its internal organisation and relatively minimal captioning mean that in my opinion not a great deal that is meaningful can be extracted from it: contemplating it, I felt a wave of empathy for first year Archaeology undergraduates puzzled by the illusion of a typological sequence! Contrastingly, I could find nothing made in the displays, for example, of Glasgow academics’ contributions to the study of the long Iron Age of Scotland, from the products of the late Horace Fairhurst’s fieldwork on. I thought this was a trick very definitely missed: in a museum otherwise given over to Glasgow contributions to a range of disciplines (and plainly with useful Scottish Iron Age material in its collections, as the Hunterian’s easy-to-use website¹ makes plain) University staff’s contributions to field archaeology since Bryce seem entirely absent. Instead, the main archaeological display was of John Garstang’s work on second millennium BC Tell es-Sultan, at Jericho, Palestine in the early 1930s, but the relationship between these finds and the

Hunterian or indeed the University of Glasgow is not made explicit anywhere in the displays.

In a suite of displays otherwise rooted in the intellectual community of the university formed—however loosely—by the academics who worked within it, the students who passed through it, and those from its region and beyond who chose to give to it, the Jericho finds seem almost more detached than the Roman sculpture, as it patiently awaits its reinterpretation and reintegration into the displays.

1: <http://www.hunterian.gla.ac.uk/index.html> last consulted on 5 February 2009.

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Place and Memory: Excavations at the Pict's Knowe, Holywood and Holm Farm, Dumfries and Galloway, 1994–8

By Julian Thomas. Pp 320. Monochrome illustrations, 8 colour plates.

ISBN 978 1 84217 247 6

Oxbow Books. 2007. Price £48 (hb).

The volume represents the culmination of the campaign of fieldwork undertaken between 1994 and 1998, and the subsequent post-excavation analysis, on the henge monument at The Pict's Knowe, the Holywood cursus complex and a series of post alignments/cursus at Holm, Dumfries, under the direction of Professor Julian Thomas, University of Manchester.

The volume is structured in three parts, comprising 29 chapters in total, and supported by appendices of technical information. The first part reports on the results of work on The Pict's Knowe. Importantly, the archaeological evidence from Pict's Knowe is complemented by the results of an extensive programme of palaeo-environmental investigation. This has provided a detailed understanding of the changing environment from the Late Devensian to the Middle Ages. The second part of the volume presents the results of excavation at Holywood and Holm Farm. The third concluding part consists of two contributions, the first being a wide-ranging discussion of the radiocarbon dates by Patrick Ashmore and the second being a concluding discussion by Julian Thomas on 'The Dumfries Monuments and the archaeology of place'.

The impressive cover art produced by Aaron Watson grabs the readers' attention immediately (for further examples see <http://www.monumental.uk.com/>) and may suggest the contents of the volume would perhaps be less traditional in approach. In fairness, the main author discusses that the intent was to produce a 'writerly' volume to allow the largely professional audience to re-work the evidence (pp 4–5). In this respect the volume provides a thorough record of the results of the project with sufficient technical detail to reassess the evidence.

Before excavation, Pict's Knowe was thought to be a henge monument and was subject to rescue excavation due to the damage caused by cattle poaching.